Drama lessons in Aristophanes' *Frogs*

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Performed at the end of the fifth century, in early 405 B.C., Aristophanes' comedy, *Frogs*, in many ways draws things to a close. The long struggle against Sparta and her allies in the Peloponnesian War was nearly at its end: after Athens' defeat in the following year, and the subsequent challenges to Athenian democracy, much of the political and cultural landscape would change. Meanwhile, the play itself casts its eye back over two of the playwrights who would come to define the rival genre of tragedy. As such, it has often proved tempting to see Aristophanes' *Frogs* as an authoritative summing up of the first century of Greek tragedy. But what do we really learn about Greek tragedy from Aristophanes' *Frogs*? Here Ian Ruffell offers some answers.

Raiders of the lost poet

Although *Frogs* is most known for its debate between tragic poets, a problem in interpreting the play is that it does not turn its attention to a detailed treatment of Euripidean and Aeschylean tragedy until its second half. This development, indeed, seems to occur almost by accident. The play opens with Dionysos pining specifically for Euripides and intending to journey to the underworld in order to rescue his favourite poet and bring him back. The first half of the play thus consists of a series of riffs on the theme of Dionysus playing – badly – the role of Heracles (the raider of the underworld *par excellence*). Finally, he arrives at Pluto's palace to find the underworld in uproar: Euripides has laid claim to the chair of tragedy, currently occupied by Aeschylus; the population of the underworld has split into factions (the most numerous and villainous supporting Euripides), and Pluto press-gangs Dionysus into adjudicating between them. As background to this dispute, en route to Pluto's palace, Dionysus has encountered a chorus of initiates, whose set-pieces include an important statement of the ritual and political significance of drama (particularly comedy), extensive abuse of prominent individuals (alive or recently deceased), and an appeal for civic unity, the recall of exiles, and the rejection of the current crop of worthless leaders. It is in this context that the debate over tragedy takes place.

How can drama save the city?

The contest itself falls into four phases of dispute between the dead tragedians – over moral and political content, prologue technique, choral and solo songs, and weight. After this series of confrontations, Dionysus is unable to decide and so Pluto forces him to make a choice. Dionysus settles the contest on the basis of topical political questions: what to do with the wayward politician Alcib-iades (currently in self-imposed exile) and how to save the city.

Modern scholars, who have been interested in the last thirty years or so in the political contribution of Greek tragedy, are particularly fond of using as evidence these deciding questions and some of the sound-bites made in the first phase of the contest: Aeschylus and Euripides agree that tragedy should *teach* – it should display cleverness and good advice and make men better. This idea that the poet is a teacher is not a radical departure from earlier Greek poetry which frequently adopted such a didactic stance. What is more interesting is that the tragedians disagree violently on how they are to make citizens better. For 'Euripides', the goal is to examine conventional wisdom, to scrutinize and to provoke. For 'Aeschylus', dramatic characters should be models of good behaviour for the audience to imitate.

Comic misrepresentation

Both these positions are travesties of what we know of each poet. Most flagrantly misrepresented is Aeschylus, with whom the audience will have been less directly familiar, although Aristophanes does downplay the significant amount of Euripidean tragedy that reproduces conventional moral and political wisdom rather than questioning it. His Aeschylus claims that *Seven against Thebes* was a model of warlike heroism (1020–5) which is difficult to see in the original play that deals with fratricidal brothers and a terrified population in a besieged city. Similarly there is a lot more going on in the *Persians* than the petty jingoism he claims (1026–7). Dionysus' enjoyment of Aeschylean tragedy, meanwhile, seems focused rather on the spectacle and emotional response (1028–9). Aeschylus bemoans Euripides' immoral women (who commit adultery and murder), but as far as radical and transgressive women are concerned, the real Aeschylus, responsible for Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, in reality had much in common with Euripides, the author of *Medea*. Similarly, much play is had with Euripides' unconventional approach to the gods, but the gods that actually featured in Aeschylean tragedy were hardly much more straightforward than his troubled humans. Plato makes just such a complaint in the *Republic*, citing the *Niobe* and, implicitly, the *Oresteia*. Yet Aristophanes' Aeschylus is made to carry the flag for conservative rigidity in theology as in morality and politics.

The banality of tragedy

Euripidean subversiveness and Aeschylean morality are points that recur, but the running jokes that connect the series of episodes that make up the contest broaden the picture. The main thread that connects the first three episodes is the formal technique of each tragedian, and here Aeschylus' stock takes a serious battering from both Euripides and Dionysus. For example, his initial grand silence picks up a device of having silent characters: most famously Niobe, but in the surviving plays, it is notable in *Libation Bearers* where Pylades stays silent for 900 lines. Aeschylus' obscure

language is frequently mocked by both Euripides and Dionysus, epitomized by an improbable creature, the 'tawny horse-cock'. When they turn to prologues, Euripides' complaint is that Aeschylus lacks concision, and simply repeats himself for effect. Repetition is also an issue when Euripides tackles his lyrics, both verbal (the use of a refrain) and musical (the sound of the lyre: *phlattothlattophlattothrat*). By stitching together lines of Aeschylean lyric, Euripides makes the charge that Aeschylean songs are grandiloquent but ultimately meaningless chains of words (these parodic songs are the closest to pure nonsense to be found in Greek comedy). This is a picture of Aeschylus with which those who encounter the *parodos* (entry-song) of the *Agamemnon* in Greek for the first time may feel a certain sympathy, and it is, as it happens, liberally quoted here.

Aeschylus' ongoing criticism of Euripides is not for scandalous excesses but for banality or clever-sounding emptiness. His treatment of Euripides' prologues is bizarre and the point unstated. He tacks 'lost his little bottle of oil' on to a series of unexceptional Euripidean openings, and other than infuriating Euripides the point seems to be i) the bland, even stereotyped descriptive technique, ii) a subtle rhythmical point that makes Euripides' verses trip along in a light fashion, iii) the banality and repetition implied by the added phrase. Banal repetition is again to the fore in Aeschylus' parody of Euripidean lyrics. There is no problem with understanding these, but they are on trivial subjects, emotionally overblown and ramped up by empty repetitions. The first song on halcyon birds and spiders makes the point (both verbally and phonically, with the spiders notably wi-i-i-i-i-inding (*eieieieieielissete*) their webs, but it only sets up a hysterical example of a solo song (actor's 'monody'): an overwrought female slave is emotionally wracked because someone has stolen the household cockerel. Against the charge of being stiff, repetitious, and old-fashioned, Aeschylus charges Euripides with wilfully unstructured and empty virtuosity, embodied by the introduction of his alleged muse: a dancing girl clicking her castanets. This continues a running joke in comedy about the 'new music', which presented its musical invention as sexual perversity.

Weighing it all up

In these contests, Aeschylus could be said to win, solely by virtue of having the last word, but there is only one contest which is unambiguously skewed towards him. In the weighing of their verses (on a literal pair of scales), extremely selective quotation renders Aeschylus the clear winner – in terms of horses, wagons, and body count – against Euripidean abstractions. Even when Euripides does death, it is just too conceptual. All the same, Dionysus shows commendable loyalty to the artist and kind of art he was originally pining for and he is still unable to decide (1411–13). And so the contest comes to the political decider. Aeschylus argues that they should recall the politician Alcibiades, Euripides that the city should not forgive him. In a second debate about the city's safety (where it is not always clear who is saying which lines), the poets advocate a bizarre fantasy involving Kleokritos (probably Euripides), a change of the city's leaders, and a cryptically expressed return to Periclean war policy (undoubtedly Aeschylus). It is on this basis that Dionysus plumps for Aeschylus. There is no explanation, just a gag (1471) that parodically reverses a famous line from *Hippolytus* ('my tongue swore but my heart stayed silent'). He had mangled the same line at the start of the play while raving about Euripides' sophistication and cleverness. The debate about tragedy thus comes down to a simple reversal joke.

Aeschylus: a victory for nostalgia?

Not much guidance about Dionysus' reasoning is gained from his two cryptic observations that 'I think one is *sophos* (clever or wise), but I enjoy the other one' (1413) and 'one spoke wisely, *sophōs*, the other clearly *saphōs*' (1434). Given Aeschylus' impenetrability, this must be flipping the long-established jokes about Euripidean cleverness and subversion: now it is presented as less sophisticated, more transparent, and even banal; Aeschylus' obscurity becomes reinterpreted as profundity. But, even if an audience somehow forgets the insults that have been paid to both poets for half the play, this is hardly an unqualified endorsement of Aeschylean tragedy.

The most powerful thing in Aeschylus' favour is illustrated in another series of running jokes in the play: jokes on the declining quality of Athenian men, institutions, and leaders, as well as its drama: from the politicians assaulting comedians' rights, to the exiling of its former leaders and the inferiority of the new breed, to the Athenian hoplites unable to hold up their shields. This is unusually backwards-looking for Aristophanes, who often has a fine eye for the absurdity of democratic/nationalist nostalgia (*Wasps* and *Lysistrata* being good examples). In short, Aeschylus wins because he dates from the period when Athens was at her expansionist, optimistic height, fighting the good fight against Persia without being tainted with naked imperialism, creating a democracy which had not yet lost control of itself, even a more united city. Aeschylus thus wins mainly by historical association: however impenetrable, his work was somehow good for Athens.

The accidental judge

So much for the feel-good ending, but the substance bears little examination. Dionysus has not in fact moved very far, nor is he a good example to the audience, except perhaps of their own failings outside the theatre. His final decision has to be seen in the light of the running jokes that structure the entire comedy around his character. Dionysus is aligned with the Athenian audience early as an experienced spectator of comedy and above all in his taste for Euripides. That taste is questioned by Heracles (albeit hardly a leading cultural authority himself) and so too, crucially, is his bravery, drawing on a broader joke in Old Comedy about the god's lack of military competence or potential. Indeed, Dionysus is an utter coward, victimized and easily manipulated throughout the first half of the play, as he and his slave Xanthias make it to the underworld. His buffoonish role during the contest does nothing to suggest that he has changed in any significant degree. And yet he is impressed by Aeschylus in matters which he has shown himself least qualified to judge. None of this inspires a great deal of confidence in Dionysus' decision-making or genuine understanding – nor is it very flattering for the audience.

Aristophanic triumph

You won't learn much that is positive about tragedy from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, but you will discover a lot that is wrong with it, old as well as new. If there is a real dramatic winner that gains from the contest, it is not either Aeschylean or Euripidean tragedy, but Aristophanic comedy, which can, unlike that pair, be *sophos* (both clever and wise) and also enjoyable. If Aeschylus' victory embodies the nostalgic comic call for unity, then it is rather a hollow one. It offers a feel-good ending, but hardly smacks of confidence for the future. Given what would happen over the next two years, Aristophanes had never been more prescient.

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